

Teacher Discussion Guide: Frequently Asked Parent Questions

In 2018, Learning Heroes surveyed teachers and found that many of them find it difficult to have honest conversations with parents about student performance for several reasons, including that teachers would be blamed, or may not be believed by parents, especially if it contradicts what parents say they've seen in the past. Distance learning and extended school closures have only made these candid conversations more difficult, as many students likely experienced some level of unfinished learning and may not be fully prepared for this school year.

An open exchange of information and ideas can improve a parent's understanding of their child's performance. Encourage families to ask questions and don't think of the "tough" ones as problematic. Understanding the answer to these questions will help parents partner with you to ensure student academic and social/emotional growth.

At Learning Heroes, we've been listening to parents across the country in focus groups, interviews and surveys, hearing their concerns and questions. This list reflects some of the most frequently asked questions—including the tough ones—along with guidance on how to approach them.



COVID-19 PLANS

What is the district/school plan for this year?

- Have the most current details available about your building's/district's plan and be prepared to explain what you know about the new safety policies as well as academic related changes around grading or attendance. For details you don't know, give parents a timeframe for when the school will be updating details and where parents can find that information.
- Respectfully ask parents to be as flexible as possible given that the COVID-19 situation may lead to changes to the current plan.
- Share helpful links with the most current information about changes to the school/district plan as well as other community resources.
- Encourage parents to reach out to you if they have any questions or concerns.



What is being done to keep my child safe?

- Share what your school is doing to keep all students and staff safe. This includes plans for:
 - » *Helping students and staff keep socially distanced.*
 - » *Managing breakfast and lunch.*
 - » *Access and use of protective equipment like masks and hand sanitizer.*
 - » *Monitoring which students and staff have symptoms.*
 - » *If a student or staff is diagnosed with COVID-19.*
- Make sure parents have access to where the safety measures are posted.



ACADEMICS AND GRADE-LEVEL ACHIEVEMENT

If every student had distance learning last spring, aren't they all starting in the same place?

- We were all surprised by the effects of the pandemic last spring. Our first concern was to make sure families had the resources they needed at home (access to food, stable housing, etc.). Next we focused on getting every student connected and online. This was more challenging for some families and, as a result, not all students were able to take advantage of the learning opportunities. Many students spent less time on tasks because of the distractions related to learning at home.
- We worked as quickly as we could to determine which strategies would work to support learning. We made some missteps but we learned a lot about what works and what doesn't work for families and students. This conversation is an example of what works. We know that once parents understand where their child needs help, it is easier to know how to help at home.

Why hasn't the school ever had planning calls like this with me before?

- One effect of the pandemic is that we have seen firsthand the value of bringing families into conversations about learning as early as possible. Many parents are interested in getting a better understanding of what their child is expected to learn.
- The goal of this conversation is for us to work together on a plan that includes how you can help your child learn at home.

What is the benchmark test and how is my child's score used?

- Benchmark tests show a student's starting point and measure their progress. The benchmark test we use is called (*fill in the name of your benchmark test*). These tests are not meant to be graded. Instead, benchmark tests give us valuable information about where your child is performing well and help us know how to adjust teaching to meet their learning needs.
- We are sharing the benchmark data with you so you can understand where your child is in relation to where your child should be. This helps you know what to focus on at home.
- Throughout the year I will continue to share benchmark data so you see how your child is progressing and we can work together to support them in school and at home.

How will I know if my child is making progress or on grade level?

- Share your plan for how/when you will provide assessment data throughout the year.
- Let parents know where they can look to monitor progress. Share the tools that are already in place to help with this. This could include a parent portal, weekly updates that are sent home via a student folder, etc.
- Help parents know how to interpret the information they see in the parent portal or on progress reports. For example, you might say, “if you see an assignment below a certain score, this means we should talk about it. Feel free to contact me.”
- Remind parents it’s ok to ask questions if they don’t understand.

Why didn’t I know earlier that my child wasn’t on track?

- Begin by acknowledging that parents might be feeling confused. Affirming their concerns can help diffuse the situation.
- Parents may generalize and say things like “my child isn’t getting any support” or “no one has ever told me about this.” Use diagnostic questions to find out what parents might have had access to. Ask questions like:
 - » *What information have you received in the past from the school?*
 - » *What grades did your child generally receive on their report card?*
 - » *Have you seen any standardized test reports for your child in the past?*
 - » *Have you seen any information about your child’s progress in the parent portal?*
- Let parents know that you realize there is a lot of information that comes from the school, and their child’s performance and test scores aren’t always easy to understand. Share that you want to make sure they know their child’s current level of achievement so you can address the issues together and they will have the information and resources to help at home.
- Ask what ways (how and when) would work to help keep the parent informed in the future.

Why did my child receive passing report card grades if he or she isn’t on grade level?

- Let parents know that the conversation today is about understanding if their child is where they need to be and create a plan to help them reach this year’s goals.
- Share that grades represent more than grade level mastery and that they are just one piece of the bigger picture. For example:
 - » *Grades often include effort and/or progress—Good grades can come from participating in class or turning in homework or showing significant improvement from where they started. Though they have made progress, it’s possible they may still be below the standard (where they need to be).*

How will you help my child get back on grade level?

- Share your plans for helping their child. Such as, I will:
 - » *Use benchmark assessment data to understand how your child is performing. This is the key to knowing what to do and how to tailor my instruction to meet your child’s individual needs. For example: this means I change the amount and type of teaching to help them where they need it most.*



- » *Model everything for students and then give multiple opportunities to work in groups so they can practice the key skills. Maximize independent learning time to watch how well your child is applying new information. From my observations and discussions with your child I will adjust what I do to boost their learning.*
- » *Use what I learn from you to ensure I have a complete picture of how best to support your child. Throughout the year I will stay in contact so I can hear what is working at home and what else I might be able to do to support your child. For example: if your child needs help or seems frustrated completing 'homework/review' assignments, it's important to let me know.*

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND OTHER SUBJECT AREAS



How will you support my child's life skill (social/emotional) development?

- Our primary concern is the health and safety of your child. We are also very focused on developing the social/emotional skills they need to be successful and navigate all the changes happening due to new school models.
- Share with parents what you are doing to help children develop social/emotional skills. For example: (provide a concrete strategy you use such as morning meetings to build positive relationships among peers and talk about any issues, etc.)
- Let parents know about the social/emotional supports available through the school or community based organizations. Be prepared to answer questions like:
 - » *Should they contact you?*
 - » *Can they call the school counselor or nurse?*
 - » *What is the best way to contact these support staff?*
 - » *What kinds of support services can the school connect the parent with? (e.g., afterschool or enrichment programs, mental health support, counseling, a doctor, etc.).*

How is my child doing in other subjects (science, social studies, foreign language)?

- Share that you are starting with a focus on reading and math because these two subject areas serve as a foundation for other subjects. Discuss how reading is critically important to learning in other content areas like social studies, math, and science.
- Let parents know they can reach out to the other teachers to have similar discussions about progress/learning.
- Help parents put together questions they can ask the teachers from the other areas. Such as:
 - » *What are the most important things my child should know and be able to do by the end of this year in your class?*
 - » *Which of these things is my child able to do now?*
 - » *What can I do at home to help my child learn in this area?*
 - » *What should I do if I think my child is having a problem in your class?*

MY CHILD'S LEARNING GOALS



If my child is learning at home (in the case of virtual models), how will you make sure they continue to learn?

- Describe to parents how you will assess their child during the distance/hybrid learning period. Assure families that you will be able to periodically measure their child's progress and use this information to adjust instruction.
- Tell parents how you will share this information with them so they can continue to partner with you to ensure their child's progress.

What are the most important things I can do to help my child reach their learning goals this year?

- Share ideas on how to create a positive learning environment at home. Such as:
 - » *Provide a quiet space where your child can work. If you have more than one child, create a schedule of when each child can use the space.*
 - » *Be positive and praise your child for working hard and completing assignments. Celebrate successes like learning something new that was once hard for them.*
 - » *Ask your child to explain what they are learning (make it fun by having them "teach you" or other family members!).*
 - » *Monitor your child's learning. For example, as much as possible, pay attention to how they are completing their school work.*
 - » *Ask for help when you have questions or see your child needs more support.*
 - » *Encourage your child to read as much as they can. In addition to assigned reading, let your child pick what they read. Talk with your child about what they are reading.*
- Help parents know how to interpret the information they see in the parent portal or on progress reports. Let them know it's important to look at several measures, not just grades. For example: our regular communication with each other, classwork and quizzes, and your own observations as a parent.
- Based on this bigger picture of the child's progress, the parent-teacher planning tool helps you work together so that school to home learning is seamless.

How will you help with my child's IEP during this virtual/hybrid learning time?

- Communicate that this is a very important issue to you. Give concrete examples of what you are doing in your instruction to make sure their child makes progress in the goals outlined in the IEP. You can also give guidance on how to use these strategies at home.
- Tell parents you'll continue to work with the special education teacher to determine how their child can best be supported, even during virtual learning.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE TEACHER



How can I reach you when I have a problem with my child?

- Provide the parent with at least 2 ways to reach you if they have a concern. It's also important to ask families the best way and time to reach them and accommodate this as much as possible.
 - » *Note: Providing parents with a cell phone they can use to contact you is very helpful. If you are not comfortable sharing your personal cell number, ask your school administrator if it is ok to use a Google Voice number. Google Voice is a free service available to you if you have a Gmail account. You can make phone calls via the Voice app on your phone or through your web browser.*
- If your district uses Seesaw, Class Dojo, Remind, Google Classroom, MS Teams, or other applications to communicate with parents, make sure you help parents learn how to use these tools effectively or direct them to who can help. Parents may need more than a printed document or one phone call to learn these new technologies. Provide families with multiple opportunities to learn and practice how to use these apps effectively.